Leadership and Legacy: Kamala Harris and the Path to Racial Healing in the Commemoration of Tulsa and Juneteenth

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In "Leadership and Legacy: Kamala Harris and the Path to Racial Healing in the Commemoration of Tulsa and Juneteenth," we explore the significant influence of Vice President Kamala Harris on the ongoing dialogue about racial justice in America. Through an analysis of her role in commemorating pivotal historical events such as the Tulsa Race Massacre and Juneteenth, this paper delves into how her leadership has not only acknowledged but actively engaged with the nation's painful past. As the first woman, first Black, and first South Asian Vice President, Harris's unique perspective and policy initiatives offer a compelling narrative of how contemporary leaders can shape the course of racial healing and justice. This examination reveals the power of leadership in transforming public memory and highlights the critical role of inclusive narratives in fostering a truly equitable society.

Keywords: Kamala Harris, racial healing, Tulsa Race Massacre, Juneteenth, leadership, public memory, civil rights, racial justice, historical commemoration, equity.

Introduction

The history of the United States is profoundly marked by its struggles with racial violence and the quest for civil rights and equality. Two pivotal moments in this historical trajectory—the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 and the annual celebration of Juneteenth—exemplify the deep-seated challenges and the ongoing journey towards racial justice. These events not only highlight moments of profound injustice and liberation but also underscore the resilience and tenacity of the African American community. On one end of this historical spectrum lies the horrific destruction of Tulsa's Greenwood District, known as "Black Wall Street," which, in 1921, saw one of the worst incidents of racial violence in American history. On the other end is Juneteenth, a day that marks the joyful celebration of June 19, 1865, when the last enslaved African Americans in Texas were informed of their freedom—a delayed yet joyous confirmation of their liberation, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

In contemporary times, these commemorations intersect with the presence of Vice President Kamala Harris—the first woman, the first Black American, and the first person of South Asian descent to hold the office. Her ascent to this high rank in American government is not merely a personal achievement but a beacon of the ongoing fight for racial equality and systemic reform. Vice President Harris has consistently advocated for policies addressing issues such as police reform, racial disparity in healthcare, and broader civil rights protections, positioning her as a pivotal figure in the nation's continued struggle towards racial justice.

This paper will explore how Kamala Harris's role and advocacy contribute to and influence the broader narrative of racial healing and justice in America. Through her leadership, Harris embodies the promise of progress and the complex layers of reconciliation—a figure who stands at the intersection of acknowledging past atrocities like the Tulsa Race Massacre while celebrating the emancipatory promise of Juneteenth. Thus, her leadership not only mirrors the achievements made but also highlights the work that remains in achieving true justice and equality. The presence of such a leader

in the highest echelons of government can potentially catalyze a more profound engagement with America's racial history and encourage a more inclusive approach to commemoration and national reckoning.

Historical Context and Importance of Tulsa and Juneteenth

Detailed Account of the Tulsa Race Massacre

Events Leading Up to the Massacre: The Tulsa Race Massacre began on May 31, 1921, when tensions escalated after a young Black man named Dick Rowland was accused of assaulting Sarah Page, a white woman, in an elevator in downtown Tulsa. Although the facts of the encounter remain unclear, the allegation alone was enough to ignite racial animosities in a climate already fraught with post-World War I economic strain and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. The Tulsa Tribune, a local newspaper, published an inflammatory article that essentially called for a lynching, which precipitated a gathering of a white mob outside the courthouse where Rowland was being held.

Impact on the Greenwood Community: Greenwood, known affectionately as "Black Wall Street" for its affluent African American community, was a beacon of Black prosperity that was rare for the time due to systemic racial segregation. The white mob, enflamed by rumors and racial hatred, launched an attack on Greenwood on June 1, destroying homes, businesses, and churches over 35 city blocks. It is estimated that up to 300 Black residents were killed, and over a thousand homes and businesses were burned to the ground. The massacre resulted in significant economic and emotional devastation, with survivors losing their livelihoods and homes, receiving no compensation or official acknowledgment for decades.

Long-Term Implications: The long-term effects of the massacre included a generational wealth gap for Black Tulsans, as no insurance claims for the damages were honored. The silence around the events contributed to

historical amnesia, with the massacre omitted from local and national histories for years. Only in recent decades has the massacre begun to be acknowledged and taught as part of a broader reevaluation of racial violence in American history.

Significance of Juneteenth

Historical Background of Juneteenth: Juneteenth marks the day on June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger of the Union Army arrived in Galveston, Texas, and announced the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the last enslaved people in the United States—two and a half years after President Lincoln's executive order had officially outlawed slavery. This announcement was met with jubilant celebrations by newly freed Black Americans, establishing a foundational moment for African American freedom and justice.

Celebration of Juneteenth: Initially, Juneteenth celebrations included prayers, speeches, reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, and public gatherings and are often accompanied by rich traditions such as parades, singing, and the preparation of special foods. These festivities serve not only as a celebration of freedom but also as a time to honor the heritage and contributions of African Americans to the nation.

Evolution from a Regional Holiday to a National Symbol: For decades, Juneteenth was primarily celebrated in Texas and other parts of the South. However, during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, it became more widely recognized as a symbol of African American freedom and resilience. The spread of the Black population to other parts of America due to the Great Migration carried the Juneteenth celebrations nationwide. In 1980, Texas became the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday, with other states gradually following. Recently, it gained recognition as a federal holiday, affirming its importance as a national symbol of emancipation and enduring strength, reflecting both a historic triumph and a continuous struggle for true equality and recognition.

Kamala Harris's Role in Advocating for Racial Justice

Overview of Harris's Career and Her Advocacy on Civil Rights Issues

Kamala Harris's career has been marked by a series of historic milestones, each representing a step forward in her long-standing commitment to civil rights and social justice. Beginning her career in the Alameda County District Attorney's Office, she later became the District Attorney of San Francisco and then the Attorney General of California. During these roles, Harris focused on issues ranging from criminal justice reform to child exploitation and domestic violence, advocating for the vulnerable and seeking systemic changes within the legal framework.

As California's Attorney General, Harris launched initiatives that aimed to reduce recidivism, protect the rights of the marginalized, and investigate cases involving police misconduct. Her policies often reflected a dual approach: enforce the law while ensuring justice reform. This balance has been a defining feature of her career, recognizing the necessity of both safeguarding public safety and addressing the disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on minority communities.

Specific Policies or Speeches by Harris That Relate to Racial Justice

In her role as a U.S. Senator and later as Vice President, Harris has been vocal about the need for comprehensive police reform and greater accountability. One of her significant legislative efforts in the Senate included co-sponsoring the Justice in Policing Act of 2020, which aimed to combat police misconduct, excessive force, and racial bias in policing. The bill proposed measures such as banning chokeholds, creating a national police misconduct registry, and limiting the transfer of military-grade equipment to local law enforcement agencies.

Harris has also been influential in her speeches, where she often discusses the importance of acknowledging and addressing systemic racism directly. In her speeches, she frequently emphasizes the need for America to

confront its racial history to move forward toward healing and unity. For instance, in her address following the verdict in the George Floyd murder trial, Harris highlighted the significance of the moment for racial justice in America, calling it a step forward but reminding the audience of the long road ahead.

Harris's Role in Promoting Legislation or Initiatives That Acknowledge Historical Racial Injustices

Vice President Harris has actively supported several initiatives that seek to acknowledge and remedy historical racial injustices. Her advocacy has extended to supporting economic and educational programs that aim to close the racial wealth and opportunity gaps. For example, she has advocated for the expansion of access to quality affordable housing and education for communities of color, recognizing these areas as crucial for correcting historical inequities.

Additionally, Harris has been a proponent of broader voter rights protections, which she views as essential for protecting the civil rights of all Americans, particularly minorities who have been historically disenfranchised. She played a key role in the administration's push against voter suppression efforts, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that all Americans have the ability to participate freely and fairly in the electoral process.

Through these efforts, Kamala Harris has demonstrated a consistent commitment to furthering racial justice and equality, using her positions of influence to promote policies that address both the symptoms and the root causes of racial inequality. Her work highlights the critical role of leadership in shaping a more just society, serving as a bridge between America's divided past and its hoped-for equitable future.

The Role of Leadership in Commemorative Practices

Analysis of How Leadership Shapes Public Memory and Narratives Around Historical Events

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping how societies remember and interpret their past. Leaders can influence public memory not only through the policies they endorse but also through the narratives they choose to emphasize. Public memory is often constructed around narratives that resonate with the identities, values, and aspirations of a community, and leaders have the tools and platforms to either reinforce or challenge these narratives. By choosing which events are commemorated, how they are remembered, and the language used to describe them, leaders can significantly impact the collective understanding of history.

For instance, the manner in which a leader addresses historical injustices or celebrates milestones can encourage a more inclusive and comprehensive engagement with history. This may include acknowledging the painful parts of a nation's past, providing platforms for previously marginalized voices, and integrating these narratives into the broader national story.

Harris as an Example of How Leaders Can Influence the Process of National Healing and Remembrance

Vice President Kamala Harris exemplifies how leaders can actively participate in the process of national healing and remembrance. Her speeches and public statements often address the need to confront uncomfortable truths about America's racial history. Harris has used her position to advocate for a truthful examination of historical events like the Tulsa Race Massacre and to promote the significance of Juneteenth as not just a celebration of freedom, but also a reminder of the delays and denials of justice that African Americans have faced.

Moreover, Harris's leadership style includes engaging directly with communities that have historically been overlooked or underserved. By

doing so, she not only acknowledges their history but also validates their experiences and contributions to the American narrative. This approach fosters a more inclusive public memory that can facilitate healing and understanding across different community divides.

The Impact of Having Diverse Leadership on the Interpretation and Commemoration of Historical Events Like Tulsa and Juneteenth

Diverse leadership fundamentally alters the interpretation and commemoration of historical events. Leaders from varied backgrounds bring different perspectives and priorities to the forefront, which can lead to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of history. When leaders like Kamala Harris, who represent both racial and gender diversity, engage in commemorative practices, they highlight aspects of history that might otherwise be marginalized or misunderstood.

This diversity in leadership can lead to broader societal recognition of events like Tulsa and Juneteenth, which in turn can change how these events are taught in schools, discussed in public discourses, and remembered in communal narratives. The presence of diverse leaders ensures that the commemoration of such events is not only a reflection but also a re-evaluation of the narratives that have been dominant. It encourages a collective remembrance that is more reflective of a society's diversity, promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of the multiple histories that shape a nation.

In summary, leadership is pivotal in shaping how societies remember their past and engage with their present. Leaders like Kamala Harris play a vital role in guiding the process of national healing and remembrance, ensuring that it is inclusive and reflective of the nation's diverse history. This not only aids in healing historical wounds but also strengthens the fabric of society by fostering a shared understanding and respect for all narratives.

Contemporary Significance and Public Engagement

How the Public's Engagement with These Historical Events Has Shifted Over Time

Public engagement with the Tulsa Race Massacre and Juneteenth has undergone significant evolution over the years. Initially, the Tulsa Race Massacre was largely omitted from history books and public consciousness, largely due to deliberate historical erasure and the trauma associated with the event. However, in recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest, driven by broader discussions on racial justice and historical accountability. This shift was accelerated by media coverage, documentaries, and advocacy by descendants and community leaders who have pushed for recognition and reparations.

Juneteenth, similarly, has seen a transformation from a primarily Texas-based celebration to a nationwide event, culminating in its designation as a federal holiday in 2021. This wider recognition is a testament to the growing public awareness and acknowledgement of the day's historical and cultural importance. It has become a symbol of freedom and the ongoing struggle for equality, resonating with broader audiences across the United States.

The Role of Education, Public Policy, and Leadership in Maintaining the Relevance and Importance of Tulsa and Juneteenth Commemorations

Education plays a crucial role in maintaining the relevance of historical events like the Tulsa Race Massacre and Juneteenth. Integrating these events into school curricula ensures that new generations understand their significance and the contexts in which they occurred. This educational approach helps in building a more informed citizenry that can engage with the nation's history critically and empathetically.

Public policy also has a significant role in these commemorations. By recognizing these dates officially, as seen with Juneteenth becoming a

federal holiday, governments can help cement their importance in the national consciousness. Such recognition not only honors the victims and celebrates the milestones but also encourages public institutions to invest resources in commemorating these events appropriately.

Leadership is instrumental in guiding public engagement and discourse around these historical events. Leaders can leverage their platforms to raise awareness, advocate for policy changes, and mobilize resources. For instance, leaders can support initiatives that explore these events in depth, fund museums and memorials, and sponsor public lectures and forums.

Examples of Public Events or Educational Programs That Have Effectively Contributed to the Healing Process

Several public events and educational programs have effectively contributed to the healing process and enhanced public engagement with the history of Tulsa and Juneteenth. Examples include:

- **The Greenwood Cultural Center** in Tulsa, which plays a pivotal role in educating the public about the history of the Greenwood District and the 1921 massacre. It hosts exhibitions, speakers, and educational programs that delve into the impacts of the massacre and the resilience of the Black community in Tulsa.
- **Juneteenth Music Festivals and Cultural Events**, which are held across the country, featuring performances, art, and food that celebrate African American culture and history. These festivals not only serve as celebrations of freedom but also as platforms for community education and cohesion.
- **Educational Initiatives**, such as the incorporation of Black history studies into school curricula that cover the origins and impacts of Juneteenth and the Tulsa Massacre. These programs are crucial for fostering a comprehensive understanding of American history.
- **Virtual Reality Experiences**, such as those that recreate historical settings and events, allowing users to 'experience' the past in immersive ways. For instance, virtual tours of the Greenwood District

before its destruction can provide powerful insights into what was lost during the massacre.

Through these varied channels, the public engagement with the Tulsa Race Massacre and Juneteenth not only fosters remembrance and honor for those impacted but also educates and unites communities in a shared commitment to justice and equity. These efforts underscore the contemporary significance of these events, ensuring that they remain relevant and instructive for future generations.

Conclusion

Summary of Kamala Harris's Leadership and Racial Healing

Vice President Kamala Harris's leadership marks a significant chapter in the American narrative of racial healing and justice. Her role as a high-ranking leader who actively addresses the deep-seated issues of racial inequality is emblematic of how far the nation has come and the work that remains. Harris's engagement with the commemorations of critical historical events such as the Tulsa Race Massacre and Juneteenth underscores her commitment to acknowledging past injustices while advocating for a future where such disparities are eradicated.

By emphasizing the importance of these commemorations, Harris helps ensure that they are not merely remembrances of past sorrows and injustices but are also celebrations of resilience and calls to action. Her involvement brings a unique perspective to these events, intertwining her identity and her leadership with broader efforts towards national reconciliation and healing.

Reflection on the Potential Future Impacts of Harris's Contributions to Racial Justice

Looking forward, the contributions of Kamala Harris to racial justice are poised to leave a lasting impact on American society. As she continues to champion policies aimed at addressing systemic racism—be it through reforming policing, enhancing educational opportunities, or improving economic access for historically marginalized communities—her efforts can lead to significant structural changes. The trajectory of her career suggests that her influence will extend beyond her term in office, inspiring future policies and potentially motivating a new generation of leaders dedicated to equity and justice.

The Importance of Leadership in Shaping a More Inclusive and Equitable Historical Narrative

The role of leaders like Kamala Harris in shaping a more inclusive and equitable historical narrative cannot be overstated. Leadership in this context goes beyond the confines of policy and governance; it is about setting a tone for national discourse, about choosing which parts of our history to highlight and learn from, and about ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. Leaders have the unique ability to bring marginalized histories to the forefront of public consciousness, thereby promoting a more accurate and holistic view of the nation's past.

Moreover, diverse leadership brings diverse perspectives, which are crucial in a society as varied as the United States. Leaders who can draw from their own experiences and the experiences of their communities can craft policies and narratives that truly reflect the complexities of society. As demonstrated by Vice President Harris, such leadership is essential not only for healing old wounds but also for preventing new ones, ensuring that the nation moves towards a future where justice and equity are not just ideals, but realities.

In conclusion, the involvement of Kamala Harris in the racial justice discourse exemplifies the profound impact that informed, compassionate, and proactive leadership can have on our collective history and future. Her career and advocacy serve as powerful reminders of the role that leaders must play in weaving a national fabric that genuinely reflects the diversity and strength of its people.